DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 428 891 PS 027 475

AUTHOR Katz, Lilian G.
TITLE International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education: Lessons from My Travels.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 10p.; Contained in PS 027 470.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Opinion Papers (120)
JOURNAL CIT Early Childhood Research & Practice; v1 n1 Spr 1999
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Context; Cultural Influences; *Early Childhood Education; Educational Environment; *Educational Practices; *Foreign Countries; *Perspective Taking; Teacher Attitudes; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Working with early childhood colleagues in other countries can be enlightening and enriching. This paper offers seven insights gained from the international experience: (1) "What It Feels Like To Be a Teacher" discusses observations of student and teacher behavior and attitudes in classrooms in China, a Caribbean island, and India; (2) "Similarities across Countries" notes that teachers' roles may be more powerful determinants of their ideas, ideals, ideologies, concerns, and beliefs than are the larger political, social, and cultural contexts in which they work; (3) "Problems with Comparative Studies" discusses the difficulties inherent in comparing educational provisions and effectiveness across countries; (4) "The Spread of Ideas across Borders" discusses the influence of the British Infant School approach in the 1960s and 1970s, the influence of the innovative province-wide reform work of British Columbia, Canada, in the 1980s, and most recently the influence of the Reggio Emilia approach; (5) "Issues Unique to the United States" explores interests that appear of concern only in the United States, such as the development of self-esteem in children; (6) "Self-Criticism in the United States" discusses one American habit--self-deprecation; and (7) "U.S. Leadership in Anti-Bias and Multicultural Awareness" notes that the United States deserves a great deal of credit for leadership in addressing anti-bias and multicultural issues. A version of this paper was originally presented at the President's Seminar "International Perspectives on Young Children, Their Families, and Early Care and Education" at the Annual Conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children in Toronto, Canada in November, 1998. (LPP/EV)

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Volume 1, Number 1

International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education: Lessons from My Travels

Lilian G. Katz

A version of this paper was originally presented at the President's Seminar: International perspectives on young children, their families, and early care and education at the Annual Conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children; Toronto, Canada; November, 1998.

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PS 027475

Abstract

Noting that working with early childhood colleagues in other countries can be enlightening and enriching, this paper offers seven insights gained from the experience: (1) "What It Feels Like To Be a Teacher" discusses observations of student and teacher behavior and attitudes in classrooms in China, a Caribbean island, and India; (2) "Similarities across Countries" notes that teachers' roles may be more powerful determinants of their ideas, ideals, ideologies, concerns, and beliefs than are the larger political, social, and cultural contexts in which they work; (3) "Problems with Comparative Studies" discusses the difficulties inherent in comparing educational provisions and effectiveness across countries; (4) "The Spread of Ideas across Borders" discusses the influence of the British Infant School approach in the 1960s and 1970s, the influence of the innovative province-wide reform work of British Columbia, Canada, in the 1980s, and most recently the influence of the Reggio Emilia approach; (5) "Issues Unique to the U.S." explores interests that appear of concern only in the United States, such as the development of self-esteem in children; (6) "Self-criticism in the U.S." discusses one American habit — self-deprecation; and (7) "U.S. Leadership in Anti-bias and Multicultural Awareness" notes that the United States deserves a great

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deal of credit for leadership in addressing anti-bias and multicultural issues.

Introduction

My first overseas assignment in early childhood education was in 1974 when UNESCO asked me to conduct preschool training seminars in Barbados in the West Indies. At that time, I was too young and too inexperienced to be nervous about such an assignment. I reckoned that since it would take about 13 hours to get there, I would be able to think of what to do on the way! If I were asked to conduct a similar mission today, in a place about which I was so woefully ignorant, I would be deeply apprehensive—and rightly so! Since then, it has been my privilege to work with colleagues in Barbados many times, and I have also worked with our colleagues in more than 40 other countries—in some, many times over.

I find that the experience of traveling and working with colleagues in other lands is enlightening, instructive, and enriching—not so much because of what we see, but because what we see makes us think about things that we have not thought about before. Or perhaps it is simply that travel makes us think about something differently from the way we've thought about it before. In this article, I want to share seven hunches or hypotheses that have occurred to me in the course of these international experiences.

1. What It Feels Like To Be a Teacher

During my first visit to the People's Republic of China in 1978, I remember seeing some 40 three-year-old children sitting patiently and attentively on little chairs for a good 40 minutes, watching a small group of their peers performing a dance about the "bitter years" of life before Mao's revolution.

Observing this scene provoked several questions. Let me add that I am not here passing judgment on the desirability of what I observed, but on the reflections the scene provoked. Could something like this be seen in the United States? How is it possible, I wondered, for such young children to sit so attentively for so long? One possible hypothesis is that, compared to other aspects of their total environments, this event was highly stimulating. In other words, the stimulus value of a given event for a given individual is a function of the range of other events in his or her daily life. For these children, by comparison, the rest of their lives so lacks stimulation that this event was absorbing, if not entertaining. However, teachers of young children in North America have to compete with environments full of highly stimulating and exciting events, such as dozens and dozens of toys, video games, movies, television shows, colorful books, Barbie dolls, and much more.

During that same visit, I asked a teacher how she was able to get the children to be so attentive and compliant for such long periods of time. My question seemed strange to her! Her response was something like "of course they respond to my requests!" It was as though noncompliance was unthinkable! This observation provoked the hunch that an adult who expects compliance—indeed, takes it for granted—addresses children in such a way as to obtain it (i.e., with calm confidence and free of hostility). And because they obtain compliance so readily, they address the children with the full expectation that it will be forthcoming. Thus, there is a positive recursive cycle: the more confidently and

optimistically we address children, the more likely they are to respond in a desirable way, which in turn strengthens the adult's confidence. According to this hypothesis, the negative recursive cycle can also be predicted: the more tentatively the adult addresses the child, the less likely he or she will respond in the way desired, leading to less confidence in the adult, and so forth.

I raise this issue not to press for authoritarianism or for greater or stricter adult control over children. It is of interest because I am constantly stymied by how many teachers in the United States *feel* powerless before very young children. They argue with me that they must use time-out procedures, "stickies," and other forms of bribery to get children to "behave." A U.S. teacher of 5-year-olds recently reported that when her pupils become rowdy, she reminds them that if they don't settle down, the class mascot tiger, whose smiling face graces the main blackboard in the room, *"will get angry with them!"* Wouldn't such forms of manipulation signal to children that the adult lacks authority, cannot be trusted to know what to do, or to know what is right? I often wonder about an adult's willingness to depend on an imaginary creature in that way.

A few years ago, I visited a school on one of the Caribbean islands. Fifty-three 6- and 7-year-olds were working on the tasks of the morning, which were to punctuate half-a-dozen simple sentences and to complete a few simple addition problems. Every child was working—some more proficiently than others, of course. There were no children under desks, at the pencil sharpener, pinching or annoying others, or in any other way being rowdy or inattentive, as might be expected in such a crowded classroom at home.

How is that possible, I wondered? I don't want to imply in any way that what I saw was an ideal way to educate the young; the classroom was also considered much too crowded by educators within the country. Nevertheless, at least two hypotheses concerning how to account for the scene came to mind. One is that, based on what I knew about their country, teachers are never criticized in the presence of children. On the contrary, if one of these children were to complain at home about something in school, or about the teacher, family members—most likely all of them in unison—would urge the child to "mind the teacher" and get on with the work. I am not suggesting that there is no criticism of teachers; it is just not done in front of the children.

I am often amazed at what I hear adults say about teachers and schools in the presence of children in the United States. I do not want to imply that such criticism is never warranted; that is not the point of relevance here. While such indiscretion on the part of adults in front of children does not solve the problem at issue in the criticism, it may put children in the difficult position of having divided loyalties. Even more seriously, it may in some cases also empower children to be defiant. In these cases, the teacher's behavior is likely to result in further criticism.

Another hypothesis occurred to me as I watched the teacher explain the tasks, respond to occasional questions, and fairly successfully encourage children to proceed. It seemed to me that she was deeply convinced (rightly or wrongly) that what she was doing was right and was in the children's best interests. Feeling reasonably sure of the rightness of what he or she is doing surely helps a teacher to give children clear signals about what is expected and valued. My hunch is that such certainty and clarity encourages the children to carry on with the tasks in spite of their lack of relevance or interest, and deters

resistance or defiance.

I am not aware of any research on how convinced U.S. teachers feel about the rightness of what they are asking of children. However, the abundance of curriculum approaches competing for adoption and presented to teachers through various media must surely raise doubts among many of them about the appropriateness of their own practices.

During a recent visit to India, I was taken to see a new state-supported school of which the local residents were very proud. In the first-grade classroom, there were 60 children—all boys. Only the teacher was provided with a desk and chair; all the children were sitting on the floor. The instructional materials were permanently attached to the walls. The teacher pointed to items on the wall displays with a long stick and asked questions. Many of the boys eagerly raised their hands to offer answers. All seemed to be attending to the ongoing instructional exchanges. How is it possible that no child was throwing bits of paper, talking to another, or otherwise off task or behaving disruptively?

One hypothesis is that already, at this early age, these boys are motivated by the belief (rightly or wrongly) that this experience offers them their only hope of a better life. It is difficult to imagine such a belief among most American 6-year-olds!

2. Similarities across Countries

When I am invited to speak to our colleagues outside of the United States, I always begin with the caveat that the ideas and information I present are based largely on U.S. experience and research and therefore might not be applicable to the listeners whose traditions, constraints, and contexts may be very different. That having been said, however, I am always amazed at the similarities across countries. One hypothesis is that people who do the same kind of work across countries understand each other better than those who occupy different roles—even in the same fields—within a country. Get a group of teachers of 4-year-olds, or of teacher educators, or administrators, or government officials from various countries together, and they are likely to understand each other in many significant ways more readily than they will understand or be understood by those in other groups, even from their own countries. In other words, my hunch is that our roles may be more powerful determinants of our ideas, ideals, ideologies, concerns, and beliefs, etc., than is the larger political, social, and cultural context in which we work.

Another aspect of similarities across countries—at least in the field of early childhood education, is the similar low status, low pay, and poor or insufficient training that is commonly found. In many countries, those responsible for regulating staff requirements in the early childhood field point out that for any female, the care of young children "comes naturally"—it is "instinctive"—and caregiving and working with very small children does not require training and expensive qualifications! Of course, if we continue to talk to decision makers about how much children learn through play, and how they "construct their own knowledge," we may be confirming their idea that children do not need well-qualified and well-paid adults.

3. Problems with Comparative Studies

I recently came across a reference to early comparative research attributed to the 4th century, BC, to the effect that "Xenophon analyzed what he described as Persian education, thereby enabling the Greek reader to compare it with Spartan schooling" (Spaulding, 1989). But comparing educational provisions and effectiveness across countries—as in the case of the International Association for the Evaluation of Education (IEA) work reported on briefly by David Weikart in his presentation at the 1998 National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) annual conference in Toronto—raises enormously complex questions. What are good and reliable indices of educational effectiveness across countries and languages?

To compare reading and spelling achievement across countries, particularly in the early years of schooling, is quite different from comparing achievement in addition and subtraction. To do the former would be fair only if accompanied by an index of grapheme-to-phoneme efficiency of each of the languages involved. Similarly, young children's understanding of the calendar may vary; in Chinese, for example, the names of the days of the week are linked to their number, unlike in English and other European languages.

Many of us have been stimulated by Tobin, Wu, and Davidson's work (1989) comparing preschools in three countries. But how did they select the three preschools? How representative of each of their countries are they? How much of what we learn about each of them is attributable to their host countries or cultures, rather than to the individuals responsible for the classrooms featured or to the populations they serve? These questions are often difficult to answer reliably. Basing practice on international comparative achievement scores is very risky.

4. The Spread of Ideas across Borders

A frequent observation from working in a variety of countries is the extent to which practices in our field are adopted across borders. In the 1960s and early 1970s, there was great interest in the United States in adopting the British Infant School approach to early primary education characteristic of much of England during the so-called Plowden years (which owed quite a bit to Dewey and Progressive Education). However, since the late 1980s, there has been great readiness in the United Kingdom to adopt (indiscriminately, I might add) many U.S. practices purported to raise standards of achievement, for example, extensive testing of children in the form of what the English call "attainment targets." More recently, the United Kingdom has adopted practices such as the "literacy hour" and the "numeracy hour" in efforts to raise levels of achievement nationwide. These "innovations" would have been unthinkable during the Plowden years.

In the mid-1980s, many of us were eager to learn from the innovative province-wide reform work of British Columbia, Canada. It is my recollection that in the United States, the rethinking of state curriculum guidelines, age grouping practices, and student–parent–teacher conferencing in Nebraska, Iowa, Kentucky, and elsewhere was based in considerable part on what we were learning from north of the U.S. border.

In the United States in the 1990s, one of the strongest movements across borders has been intense interest in the magnificent and stunning preprimary schools of the small northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia. Thousands of us have visited Reggio Emilia; numerous conferences, an electronic discussion list [REGGIO-L], the impressive

national newsletter *Innovations* (sponsored by the Merrill-Palmer Institute in Detroit), and several books are all examples of the extent to which many of us continue to be inspired by the impressive achievements of Reggio Emilia.

But I note here that in the course of the lively discussions and enthusiastic support for Reggio Emilia practices and, in particular, through efforts to adopt their ideas in the United States (as in the Model Early Learning Center in Washington, DC), I have heard no shrill or strident criticism or rejection of this movement on cultural grounds. Why haven't Reggiophiles been accused of cultural irrelevance or hegemony or imperialism with respect to ethnic and culturally diverse groups? Why have the questions raised by scholars like Jipson (1991) and Delpit (1988) about appropriate practice, for example, not been raised in discussion of adopting the Reggio Emilia approach in various parts of our country? Could it have something to do with the fact that the ideas come from Europe rather than from the usual bastions of mainstream American thought? I am puzzled by this situation!

5. Issues Unique to the United States

I often wonder about problems that seem unique to the United States; issues that I am *not* asked to talk about in other countries. For example, outside ~~of the United~~ States, rarely am I asked to talk about the development of self-esteem or about classroom management issues. Of course, self-esteem is unlikely to be an issue in a country that is struggling with high infant mortality, starvation, or safe water supplies. It might be called an issue of luxury!

Furthermore, I can't remember ever seeing a teacher outside of the United States say something to a group of young children like "I like the way X is sitting!" I have seen teachers in other countries say things like "Please turn around and sit quietly" without hostility or apology, seemingly with the full expectation of compliance. Furthermore, in other countries, I see almost no "Disneyfication" in classrooms! I did see some smiling animals on the walls in Greece a few years ago and a Mickey Mouse cut-out posted on a wall in a day nursery in India last year, but these occurrences are relatively rare outside of the United States.

Are these differences simply related to the larger cultures in which they occur? Do they say anything about the assumptions we make about the nature of children or, as the Reggio Emiliani put it, about differences in the "image of the child" in these countries? Do these differences matter?

The preoccupation with self-esteem so marked in the United States (and so misconstrued, I might add) is of special interest to me (see Katz, 1995). What are some hypotheses to account for it? One may be that still today, with all its faults, the United States offers a remarkably open society. In the United States, status (or esteem) is not ascribed at birth as in many other societies; it has to be achieved. One of the expressions I was taught long ago as an English child was "Bless the squire and his relations and always know your proper stations!" But deep down in the U.S. psyche, it is believed (or fantasized) that anyone can be anything he or she wants to be; a sort of "Where there's a will there's a way!" philosophy. So we use questionable expressions like "success for all," "realizing the child's full potential," and "schools for success," rendering these terms meaningless. The meaning of an open society is not that everyone can be in first

place (if only he or she would try hard enough) but that *all are equally worthy of the good life.* Indeed, the goals of schools should not be to make every child into a scientist, engineer, doctor, CEO, or lawyer, but to make sure that whatever occupations they ultimately enter into *are not predetermined by gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, class, or other characteristics ascribed at birth.* This means that education has to include high on its list of goals the ability to lead a satisfying life (which, in my view, would have to include a lot of emphasis on aesthetic values and all the arts).

Americans are, I think, unique in believing that every problem has a solution without acknowledging that every solution creates new problems, some of which may be worse than the old ones!

6. Self-Criticism in the United States

But now you see one of the most typical of American habits—that of self-deprecation! We Americans are always ready to say things like "the trouble with our culture is" or "in our culture" something is wrong, implying that others are better. We rarely acknowledge that most of our problems can be found or matched elsewhere. Surely, much is wrong in the United States, and there will always be great need to improve the quality of life of all members of our society. But are there better societies that you can point to with real confidence? Indeed, all cultures have biases, prejudices, and some social classes or social hierarchies. For some reason, such social divisions are difficult to remove or to change.

People never wish to disinherit themselves: whatever they feel contributed to their success, they also want for their children; whatever they believe prevented their success, they don't want for their children. Furthermore, it may be that identification of and wariness or suspicion of "outsiders" serves as an important basis for feeling like "insiders," and therefrom an important and perhaps necessary sense of belonging is generated. These phenomena are not unique to the United States.

A discussion not long ago with some colleagues started off with appreciation for the way that in some cultures—particularly the southern European and Latin American cultures—adults readily respond warmly and openly to unknown small children, and decrying its absence at home. In these other cultures, we noted, adults approach small children in the streets and buses, smile at them, inquire about their ages, names, and so forth, and easily express warmth and affection toward them. Such spontaneous expressions of warmth toward small children would be highly unlikely in North America (and in some European countries as well). But note that all of these expressive and affectionate countries are also marked by strong "macho" traditions! Are these two cultural patterns related? Is machoism and idolization of motherhood related in some way? Is it reasonable to hypothesize that the greater the equality (of opportunity, of education, of legal rights, etc.) of the two sexes, the less children are seen as manifestations of precious innocence and objects of spontaneous affection?

Surely Americans are the experts in frequent open criticism of their own schools, as I have already suggested above. This trend has certainly emerged in other countries, perhaps spontaneously, rather than learned from us. Such criticism, however, does not solve any educational problem that I can think of. There is no evidence that constant criticism of schools and teachers raises any school achievement level or any teacher's

competence. On the contrary, my hunch is that it is demoralizing to schools and teachers, which in turn may further depress effectiveness, and in turn bring on further sharp public criticism.

One of my hunches about all this self-disparagement is that other countries, particularly European countries, are more successful at hiding their failures than are Americans. I remind you also that in international comparative studies of science and math achievement, it has often happened that the former U.S.S.R. has been ahead of the United States. What shall we make of their great competence and educational successes? Compare the current average quality of life in the former U.S.S.R. and in the United States, and we might ask ourselves what these comparative scores really mean.

The United States is the only country that I know of that has had a long and deep historical commitment to the common school: free community-supported schooling for every one of its children. This commitment is increasingly under threat for a variety of understandable reasons. It is sad to watch this trend, and I hope we can pull together as educators and communities and restore faith in what can be accomplished when communities invest in common schools for all their children.

7. U.S. Leadership in Antibias and Multicultural Awareness

Finally, as I work with our colleagues all around the world, I am proud of what I think we as a country, and the NAEYC as an organization, deserve a great deal of credit for: leadership in addressing antibias and multicultural issues. I have no doubt that the United States, through this organization among others, has already and continues to contribute greatly to increasing awareness of and action on behalf of discriminated groups. We still have a very long way to go—here and elsewhere. But never underestimate the power of ideas—bad ones as well as good ones!

Let's keep up the good work for the sake of the children. The best way to influence others is to do the best we can! It may very well be that what we do speaks more loudly than what we say.

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Author Information

Lilian G. Katz is a professor of early childhood education at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign where she is also director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary & Early Childhood Education. She is a past president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and recently served as the chair of the board of directors of the National Society for the Study of Education (U.S.). Dr. Katz is author of more than 100 publications including articles, chapters, and books about early childhood education, teacher education, child development, and parenting. She has also served as editor for several publications, including *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* and *Early Childhood Research & Practice*.

Lilian G. Katz, Ph.D.
Professor of Early Childhood Education and Director, ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Children's Research Center
51 Gerty Dr.
Champaign, IL 61821-7469
Telephone: 217-333-1386
Fax: 217-333-3767
Email: l-katz@uiuc.edu

E C R P
Volume 1 Number 1
Spring 1999